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ABSTRACT

This book examines family traditions of over two centuries in the United States and finds a complicated process of change in the way Americans have celebrated holidays such as Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, Passover, and Chinese New Year as well as the life cycle rituals of birth, birthdays, coming of age, marriage, and death. The book notes that by the early nineteenth century, celebrations outside the home were becoming sentimental occasions that used consumer culture and displays of status and wealth to celebrate the idea of home and family. The 1960s saw the full emergence of a post-sentimental approach to holiday celebration, which takes place outside as often as inside the home and recognizes changes in the family and women's roles as well as the growth of ethnic group consciousness. The book traces three phases in the development of family ritual: (1) carnivalesque, outdoor celebrations lacking attention to ritual, beginning in colonial America; (2) dating from the early 1800s, with the rise of the sentimental occasion, a family ritual inside or outside the home centering around consumerism and a display of status and wealth to celebrate home and family; and (3) beginning after World War I but especially increasing in the 1970s, a post-sentimental attitude celebrating family diversity, ethnicity, and racial pluralism. The book demonstrates that Americans have invented and reinvented family rituals several times since the Victorians and have used consumer and popular culture both as symbols to rail against and as tools to enhance their celebrations. (Each chapter contains references.) (KB)

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